

AN IRREVOCABLE POINT: the racial democracy debate in Brazilian social sciences, from the 1930s to the 1950s

UMA QUESTÃO IRREVOGÁVEL: o debate da democracia racial nas ciências sociais Brasileiras, de 1930 a 1950

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ABSTRACT

From the 1930s to the 1950s Brazil was commonly referred to as a racial democracy. This idea was sustained by social scientists, politicians, and academic institutions who corroborated the validity of this concept. The Brazilian people was considered by many intellectuals at that time a model of racial harmony. The idea of Brazil as a "laboratory of civilization" soon became popular among social sciences scholars eager to apply theories and methodologies to investigate the nation's particular case. At the beginning of the 1950s, this idea was put to practice by the development of a research agenda by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and cultural organization for the country known as the UNESCO Project. The program conducted thorough investigations to determine whether or not the ideal of racial democracy could be validated. The finds of the research allowed the opening of new fields of investigation for the social sciences in Brazil and contributed to the institutionalization and professionalization of sociology and anthropology departments around the country.

Keywords: racial democracy myth, Brazilian social thought, social sciences, Gilberto Freyre, UNESCO Project.

RESUMO

Dos anos de 1930 a 1950, o Brasil era comumente referido como uma democracia racial. Essa ideia era sustentada por cientistas sociais, homens públicos e instituições acadêmicas que corroboravam a validação deste conceito. O povo brasileiro era considerado por muitos intelectuais à época como um modelo de harmonia racial. A ideia do Brasil como um "laboratório de civilização" em breve tornou-se popular entre acadêmicos oriundos das ciências sociais ansiosos por aplicar teorias e metodologias para investigar o caso particular da nação. No início dos anos 1950 essa ideia foi posta

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em prática a partir do desenvolvimento de uma agenda de pesquisa da Organização das Nações Unidas para a Educação, Ciência e a Cultura para o país conhecida como Projeto Unesco. O programa conduziu investigações minuciosas para determinar se o ideal de democracia racial poderia ser ou não validado. Os achados da pesquisa possibilitaram a abertura de novos campos de investigação para as ciências sociais no Brasil e contribuíram para a institucionalização e profissionalização dos departamentos de sociologia e antropologia ao redor do país.

Palavras-chave: mito da democracia racial, pensamento social brasileiro, ciências sociais, Gilberto Freyre, Projeto Unesco.

I. INTRODUCTION

From the end of the nineteenth century until the first decades of the twentieth, Brazil was known as a miscegenated country (SCHWARCZ, 1994). This idea was shared by many foreign naturalists who visited it as much as it was supported by Brazilian intellectuals, politicians, and institutions. Most notably the latter could be found in all, law and medicine schools, main responsible for promoting such a view of Brazilian society. At the time, it was assumed that miscegenation caused races and societies to degenerate. Race became an irrevocable point to all interpretations of Brazil and, in this way, miscegenation was held as the main character to singularize the nation.

Nonetheless, from the 1930s onwards a new agenda started to spread among social scientists and national scientific institutions who departed from a new perspective: the idea of Brazil as a racial democracy. This emergent view was mainly influenced by the work of Gilberto Freyre, who was awarded a Ph.D. from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Columbia University, in 1923, with the thesis: *Social life in Brazil in the middle of the 19th century*. Later converted into a book, *The Masters and the Slaves: a study in the development of the Brazilian civilization* (1933), it helped to accommodate the concept of miscegenation as a process prompt to reduce social distances and remove racial barriers.

From the end of the 1930s to the beginning of the 1950s, the idea of Brazil as a racial paradise became also increasingly popular among social scientists who conducted field research in Brazil. This was made possible by the creation of an international network of distinguished scholars with the support of an institutional cooperation program between the Museu Nacional (National Museum) and Columbia University (CORRÊA, 2002; MAIO, 1999).

The program owed its creation to the work of Heloisa Alberto Torres, director of the Museu Nacional, who addressed in a letter the anthropologist Frans Boaz suggesting the sending of some anthropology students to work in the country. These scholars were, above all, North-American anthropologists and political scientists such as Ruth Landes, Charles Wagley, and Melville Herskovits, among others (WAGLEY, 1957; FRY, 2002; MAIO, 1999).

Brazil was to become then, not only theoretically, but also practically, a field of experimentation for social science practitioners and scholars eager to apply theories and methods to study the country's particular case. The nation suddenly became a "laboratory of civilization"². One of the personalities who explored the new open field was the Austrian-Jewish writer Stefan Zweig who wrote a book called *Brazil, land of the future* (1941) emphasizing this topic.

For Zweig, the "great experiment" of Brazil was the country's achievement of social and racial harmonious relations among its people. For him, it ought to be taken as a model to be followed by the whole world, especially by "suicidal Europe", which was launching itself in a fratricidal war in the pursuit of "racial purity". In this way, Zweig envisioned a particularity that would one day prompt Brazil to have the recognition and the greatness that an "empire" of its proportions deserved. That is its unique way of dealing with the presence of different races, classes, colors, religions, and creeds,

[...] and none [no other nation] - and it is to prove this that I am writing this book - has solved it ["this problem"] in such a happy and enviable way; in a way in which in my opinion demands not only the attention but the admiration of the whole world. (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 7)

What Stefan Zweig was referring to as "this problem" was his diagnosis of what had led Europe into a suicidal war, the "war of all-against-all". Zweig described it as the "central problem" engaging every generation, especially his own, which he resumed in a sentence:

[...] what can we do to make it possible for human beings to live peacefully together, despite all the differences of race, class, colour, religion, and creed? It is the same old problem appearing again and again to confront each community, each state. (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 7)

What the pacifist humanist was looking for in Brazil, was not only an answer for the devastating war in Europe but a solution to the problems of nationalism and racial conflicts (which were, for him, the root causes of World War II). And what he saw in Brazil was a successful example of a society that, despite its own "complicated circumstances", had efficiently dealt with the racial matter creating a harmonious nation.

This rather questionable "successful example" was the source of inspiration of a study conducted in the country, in 1951 and 1952, by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The program, also known as UNESCO Project, was the ultimate result of the agenda of the Brazilian social sciences at the end of the 1940s, as well as a product of the chaotic situation of the international community by the end of that decade.

In this way, the international organization sponsored a research centered around the belief on the validity of racial democracy in Brazil. Thus, the idea was to present

² The expression "laboratory of civilization" was coined by the North-American historian Rudiger Bilden and became noticeable in the work of the Brazilian anthropologist Arthur Ramos, been also used by his other peers (MAIO, 1999).

to the world an example of a well-managed racial relations experiment. As Marcos Chor Maio stated:

In this sense, the UNESCO Project was a catalyst agent. An international institution created right after the Holocaust, a moment of deep crises in the Western civilization, sought in a kind of anti-Nazi Germany, localized in the periphery of the capitalist world, a society with lower rates of ethnic-racial tensions, with the perspective of turning universal what was believed to be particular. (MAIO, 1999, p. 142, *our translation*)

The proposal for this study was made by the director of the UNESCO Social Sciences Department, the Brazilian physician Arthur Ramos. In June 1950, during the 5th Session of UNESCO's General Conference held in Florence, Italy, a scientific formulation for the concept of race was in debate, according to Maio (1999). On that same occasion, the 1st Statement on Race was published. In the meantime, Brazil was chosen to be the field for research on the multiple aspects for convivence of different ethnic groups to finally create "a new political [international] conscience" (MAIO, 1999, p. 143).

Speaking of the birth of the field of International Relations, Robert Vitalis (2015) asserts that "In the first decade of the twentieth century in the United States, international relations meant race relations". From the inception of the field and the institutions related to international relations and political sciences³, in the 1920s, until the end of World War II, social scientist from Howard University - holding PhDs in international relations and political science from traditional university departments such as Harvard, Oxford and the University of Chicago - were mainly concerned to investigate the relationship between racism and imperialism. And, in this way, to oppose the *theory of race development* that had given support to white hegemony in the US and had twice led Europe into the war.

With the advent of the Cold War, however, the mainstream studies of international relations turned to the frenetic pursuit of the "security dilemma". Since then, it has been adopted as valid the assumption that,

the tradition of international relations scholarship [is taken] to be race blind. States, not races, have always been the discipline's basic unit of analysis. The "security dilemma" leaders confront is the timeless problem that constitutes international relations as a discipline, based on ideas the practitioners now routinely trace back to the ancient wisdom of Thucydides and Machiavelli, unaware that the genealogy is an invention of the Cold War years. (VITALIS, 2015, p. 19)

This is important for us in the sense that, the history of the discipline hides essential aspects of its sociology, that is, of its conception which conceals the imperialist and racist struggles behind its origins.

³ According to Robert Vitalis (2015), at the end of the nineteenth century, the very orientation of university departments towards the study of supremacy and dependency, in the context of imperial expansion in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, had influenced the creation of modern social sciences institutions.

Thus, my purpose in this article is to analyze Brazil as a research field for social sciences' debates around racial democracy. I assume that a convergence of two agendas (a national and an international) combined forces to create a hospitable atmosphere making Brazil the central stage for the UNESCO Project (MAIO, 1999). The first one was an international demand for an anti-racist agenda, that was having prominence during the 1930s and 1940s in the United States and Europe (JOSIOWICZ; MAIO, 2020). The second one the social sciences pursuit of a nationalist agenda centered around the idea of racial democracy.

In this regard, I will discuss the means that led to the consolidation of the so-called myth of racial democracy. Emphasizing the role of intellectual elites in the prevalence of such an idea. I also state that those who collaborated with this debate, such as Gilberto Freyre, were not unaware of the exclusionist and sometimes violent dimensions in the relations among races. Instead, he identified possibilities for cooperation in "fraternity zones". Which if did not exclude racism in all its instances from society, at least restrained its impetus from growing stronger.

For this matter, I will use Stefan Zweig's book, *Brazil, land of the future*, as a constitutive example of the country's alleged successful racial experiment. I will also show that the idea of a harmonious racial and social relations between the Brazilian people was a built consensus during the first half of the twentieth century (especially in the 1930s and 1940s), in the field of social sciences. In this way, I argue that the national and international racial agendas of the time intersect, opening space for the possibility of the instauration of the UNESCO Project, which took place in Brazil from 1951 to 1952.

To do so, the present work will be divided into three sections. The first part will consider Stefan Zweig's harmonious view of Brazilian racial relations. The second will discuss a built consensus around the "racial creed", the idea of democratic racial relations by considering the concept of miscegenation in Gilberto Freyre's classical book *The Masters and the Slaves* and its role in the construction of a nationalist agenda centered around the premises of racial democracy.

The intense process of miscegenation, according to Freyre, made possible the emergence of "fraternity zones" which allowed the convivence of different races in the same space despite the persistence of hierarchical structures. Gilberto Freyre is generally accounted for the creation of the racial democracy myth, an idea that was commonly accepted by Brazilian intellectuals concerned with the consolidation of national identity. Racial democracy was a consensus even among leaders of the black movements in the early years of its spread. Blinding intellectuals of the existence of racism and discrimination in the country that perpetuated social inequalities between blacks and whites.

Finally, in the last section, I will analyze how the international anti-racist agenda of the 1930s to the 1940s influenced the choice for Brazil as a field experiment for UNESCO Project. I will also revise the resulting work produced by the designated committee of UNESCO in Brazil. In doing so, I follow Maio's argument that Alfred Métraux was fully aware of the intricated racial situation in the country. He comes to admit the existence of racism and discrimination in Brazil. Although he maintains that it was a relatively harmonious society. In this way, Alfred Métraux minimizes the

effects of racism in Brazil revealing the ambiguous linkage between racial cordiality and the persistence of discrimination (MAIO, 2004).

Last but not least, with this research I do not intend to cover all the nuances concerning the racial debate in the field of social sciences in Brazil at the time. I will refrain from making considerations about other discourses being produced at the same time by those who had different opinions about the conduction of the racial question in Brazil. Indeed, the issue of the incorporation of formerly enslaved people into Brazilian society was a theme considered unresolved both at the time and up until these days – as many other authors argued.

Nonetheless, for the rather circumscribed aim of this research, I will concentrate on the spread and institutionalization of the racial democracy paradigm. A sociological interpretation that does not assume the racial tensions and inequalities present in the social tissue corroborates rather than addresses racist structures operating in society. On the other hand, the limits between a full integration of minority groups into society and the exclusion of all forms of prejudice and discrimination may conceal the bridges for a conciliation pathway in between them. Nevertheless, it is the task of academia to fight against the prevalence of all kinds of injustice.

1. THE “EXPERIMENT OF BRAZIL” AS SEEN FROM ABROAD

The awarded Austrian novelist, Stefan Zweig (1881 – 1942), published, in 1941, the book: *Brazil, land of the future*. In this book, he discusses how Brazilian society dealt with the problems of racism and nationalism. He draws from the impressions he had gotten about the country when visiting it, at the end of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s. As he explored this vast nation, he began to realize it was destined to fulfill an important role in the history of mankind, as Zweig says, “I knew I had looked into the future of our world” (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 4).

Since the first edition was published many critics and scholars have taken the task of analyzing, interpreting, and criticizing his work about Brazil. Indeed, Alejandra Josiowicz and Marcos Chor Maio note that: “Brazil, land of the future was born under the sign of political and intellectual controversies” (2020, p. 179). Despite the book’s great success in sales – selling up to 100,000 thousand copies – its reception by the Brazilian intelligentsia was not so good. “As the history of its publication reveals, the book was inscribed within an internationalist horizon and its insertion in the Brazilian intellectual environment was full of tensions” (JOSIOWICZ; MAIO, 2020, p. 186).

Among the criticism directed at Zweig’s work was the idea that he possessed only limited knowledge of Brazilian society. Fundamentally, he did not take into consideration explicit classical readings of Brazilian sociology such as *Casa-Grande & Senzala* by Gilberto Freyre (1933) and *Raízes do Brasil* by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1936). Indeed, the image offered of Brazil by Stefan Zweig as a “socially and racially harmonious community based on the principles of peaceful coexistence and

intermixing” was already part of the debates on Brazilian identity developed in the decades following the end of World War I (FONTANALS, 2019, p. 189).

This apparent disconnection results, according to Josiowicz and Maio (2020), from the book being best understood as a manifesto, stemming from the cross-dialogue (2020, p.180) of an anti-racist agenda, that was having prominence during the 1930s and 1940s in the intellectual and political debates in the United States and Europe. According to their interpretation,

For Zweig, Brazil’s potency resides not so much in its economic or political development, but in the potential creation of multiple sociocultural horizons, which he, with poetic ingenuity, believes to have seen in Brazil. (JOSIOWICZ; MAIO, 2020, p. 181)

An important thing to take into account about the legacy of Stefan Zweig’s work is that the idea of Brazil as a “great experiment”⁴ was put forward by a research project promoted by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) aiming to develop policy initiatives to combat racism. As Zweig mentions it,

But to one’s great surprise one soon realizes that all these different races – visibly distinct by their colour alone – live in fullest harmony with one another. And in spite of their different backgrounds they compete only in trying to discard their original peculiarities in order to become Brazilians as quickly as possible, and thus form a new and united nation. **Brazil - and the meaning of this great experiment seems to me exemplary** – has shown up in the simplest way the absurdity of the racial problem that is destroying our European world: by just ignoring its alleged validity.” (Zweig, 1941, p. 7, *emphasis*)

In this way, Brazil ought to be taken as a field of experimentation capable of offering “civilizational lessons” to the Western World (JOSIOWICZ; MAIO, 2020, p. 184). The study was coordinated by the Jewish Swiss-American anthropologist Alfred Métraux on race relations in Brazil, the outcome of what was the conclusion that miscegenation was creating a “new race” - “in a constant process of formation” (JOSIOWICZ; MAIO, 2020, p. 185).

It is worth mentioning that, from Zweig’s first visit to Brazil, in 1936, to the last minute of his life in this land his name was always present in the newspapers of the time. When the writer fled from Austria, in 1934, and set off to England in search of asylum, he was already a famous and well-recognized novelist and biographies-writer

⁴ As Zweig mentions it, “But to one’s great surprise one soon realizes that all these different races – visibly distinct by their colour alone – live in fullest harmony with one another. And in spite of their different backgrounds they compete only in trying to discard their original peculiarities in order to become Brazilians as quickly as possible, and thus form a new and united nation. **Brazil - and the meaning of this great experiment seems to me exemplary** – has shown up in the simplest way the absurdity of the racial problem that is destroying our European world: by just ignoring its alleged validity.” (Zweig 1941, 8, *emphasis*)

having many of his books published in different languages all around the world, including South America⁵.

In this way, Zweig's first arrival in Brazil was held with great enthusiasm by the general public, especially in Rio de Janeiro where he had first come to stay. During the few days he spent in the country, Stefan Zweig had several meetings with intellectuals, journalists, writers, politicians, and other prominent figures in society. One of the most important lectures he gave on the occasion - entitled *The Spiritual Unity of the World*, in which, he asserts his universalist premises - was then broadcasted for 43 radio stations throughout the country (COLFFIELD, 2019).

Although Zweig's first encounter with the country was marked by a great commotion, things had changed dramatically by the time of his second visit. In 1940, the world had witnessed the horrors of the war for the second time. Brazil was undergoing a dictatorship, the *Estado Novo*, led by Getúlio Vargas. Opinions about the novelist were divided among those who still appreciated his work and those who demanded a clearer position on his behalf about the current situation in Europe. Some critics argued that his indifferent behavior towards the old continent, the war, and Nazism was somewhat incoherent (COLFFIELD, 2019), morally suspicious.

Moreover, the relationship between Stefan Zweig and the Brazilian government was full of controversies. Zweig's first visit to Brazil had occurred under the sponsorship of the government with an invitation made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since that very occasion, he had manifested to his publisher in the country, Abrahao Koogan, his willingness to write about the land (FONTANALS, 2019). Although, when he returns to Brazil for the second time to collect information for the book, he finds himself in a very difficult situation.

In 1941 he earns a permanent visa from the Brazilian government to live in the country which he praises in his book, even among a fierce restrictive immigration policy of the Vargas administration. Many of his critics judge his work as being too soft with Vargas' political regime and encapsulated the book as a work of propaganda financed by the dictatorial government. See, for instance, the passage where Zweig addresses Vargas' regime: "And today, though considered to be a dictatorship, Brazil knows more individual freedom and contentment than most of the European countries." (ZWEIG, 1941, p.13).

The third and last time he came back to Brazil – during the months which anticipated his death was also marked by innumerable controversies and criticisms in an effervescent political atmosphere pervading the country dominated by nationalism. The news about the collective suicide of Stefan and Lotte Zweig, in 1942, caught with great surprise the local community in Petrópolis, as well as his friends, and citizens all around the country. Different reasons were attributed as causes for his suicide most of them having to do with his situation as a Jewish writer in exile, the ongoing situation in Europe, and even the delusion with the world's future. Some considered his attitude

⁵ Although *Brazil, land of the future* was originally written in German (*Brasilien. Ein Land der Zukunft*), it was simultaneously published and translated into Portuguese, English, Swedish, French, and Spanish (JOSIOWICZ; MAIO, 2020).

as a selfish intent, desertion, and abandonment; while others took it as an ultimate sign of protest, as he could not - or was not willing - to do during his lifetime.

Having these considerations in mind, I will proceed to the analysis of the content of the book according to the scheme proposed by David Fontanals (2019). In doing so, I will concentrate on the matters pertinent to this research, that is, Stefan Zweig's concepts of social and racial harmony in Brazilian society.

Fontanals divides the volume into two main sections. The core arguments are taken to be presented in the introduction and then developed in the following chapters. The first of the two parts constructed by Fontanals comprises the "Introduction" and the ensuing chapters "History", "Economy", and "A look at Brazilian Culture". These moments of the book emphasize different aspects of the country through which the author develops his ideas of Brazil, most of all the country's racial and national aspects. Meanwhile, the second part narrates the author's wandering experiences through some important cities and other locations of the country, being defined by Fontanals (2019) as resembling a "travel book".

1.1. 'TERRA INCOGNITA': the formation of a new men in the tropics

In *Brazil, land of the future* Stefan Zweig (1941, p. 2, emphasized by the author) declares that "from the cultural point of view Brazil is still as much as the *terra incognita* [...]"⁶. For him and for many other foreigners of his time, Brazil was still an unknown place in cultural and historical aspects "[...] as [much as] it was for the first seafaring men from the geographical point of view." For the Austrian novelist, the first contacts with the country were far more unpredictable than what he was expecting it to be.

In Stefan Zweig's mind, Brazil was conceived as, "a land for desperate immigrants and settlers, but never one from which to expect intellectual stimulation" (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 1). His journey in the country proved not only this perception to be wrong, but his curiosity grew even more to become the source of the last contribution of his lifetime to the world.

As Zweig (1941, p. 4) ultimately realizes, "It is impossible to know Brazil, a world in itself, completely". One thing, however, did not pass unnoticed by the traveler when he stepped into the land for the first time, that is, the "systematic dissolution of separate racial and national groups [that] has greatly facilitated the creation of a uniform national consciousness (...)" (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 9). The racial and the social elements producing stability and harmony in society are the most laudable features present in the chronicler's narration.

⁶ Zweig recognizes his lack of knowledge about the country illustrating a discussion he had with a businessman on board a ship sailing to Brazil. He explained to the other man that Brazil alone was larger than the contiguous United States of America, which only with reluctance the other traveler accepted. He also mentions a novel written by "a well-known English author" (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 2) whose protagonist goes to Brazil to learn Spanish revealing the writer's own misconception about the country.

The mixture of different races, which could be understood in terms of a destructive principle by many academics and scientists of the preceding generation, came to be considered, in Brazil a privilege of its people. As Lilia Schwarcz (1994) explains, from the end of the 19th century until the first decades of the 20th (1889-1930) century, it was believed that miscegenation caused races and societies to degenerate⁷. A whole assumption of evolutionist theories was applied to study individuals as they were for natural sciences, using the concept of *Social Darwinism* to study characteristics of ethnic groups.

Miscegenation in Brazil resulted from the historical process of colonization that had initiated at the beginning of the sixteenth century, or so was thought. The encounter of three human groups for four hundred years, under the same geography, a regular climate, and equal living conditions amounted to create a “thoroughly individual type”, the Brazilian (ZWEIG, 1941). In Zweig’s view, this new individual type “[lacked] in all the ‘degenerate’ characteristics against which race fanatics try to warn us” (1941, p. 9).

The reified history of the country which informs Zweig’s narrative reinforces the idea of a “pacific encounter” of cultures among different civilizations (SCHWARCZ & STARLING, 2018). The most representative document of this idea is the letter of Pero Vaz de Caminha describing the “discovery” of Brazil: the country’s “birth certificate”. As it is told by Caminha, thirteen vessels had sailed from the Tagus River on March 8, 1500, taking a new route to India, but an unexpected deviation caused by the winds led the expedition of Pedro Alvares Cabral to a land 17° latitude south on April 22.

When approaching the shores, at first sight, the Portuguese seafarers noticed the presence of naked and innocent men on the beaches.

They are of a dark brown, rather reddish colour. They have good well-made faces and noses. They go naked, with no sort of covering. They attach no more importance to covering up the private parts than they do to showing their faces. They are very ingenious in that matter. (CAMINHA, 1500 *apud* BURNS, 1966, p. 20)

The naivety and innocence in those men seem to be a characteristic of their personality. They were described as good men possessing good bodies and good faces, ready as they were to be converted and baptized to the Christian faith.

Thus, Sire, the innocence of Adam himself was not greater than these people’s, as concerns the shame of the body. Your majesty will judge if people who live in such innocence could be converted or no if they are taught the things that belong to their salvation. (CAMINHA, 1500 *apud* BURNS, 1966, p. 28)

What Pero Vaz de Caminha identified as innocent native men was later translated by European thought as “the good savage” (SCHWARCZ & STARLING, 2018). This same figure was employed by Rousseau in his writings in the eighteenth

⁷ The idea of miscegenation as a derogatory principle that caused races to degenerate was a common belief at the end of the nineteenth century. This perverse biological interpretation of a social phenomenon will only be transformed from the 1930s onwards with a paradigmatic change marked by the publication of *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933) by Gilberto Freyre (PALLARES-BURKE, 2013).

century, as Lilia Schwarcz and Heloisa Starling point out: “But what to him was only a good model to criticize Europe and civilization – and had nothing to do with direct observation – here [in Brazil] takes the form of reality” (2015, p. 29, *our translation*).

The supposed “*pacífico encontro*” between man and savage showed another characteristic or myth attributed to the natives in this newfound land, the “*pacífica natureza*”. That is the aversion to hostility or conflict in opposition to a peaceful personality, “Strange process that would define Brazil as a country of no conflict, as if the tropics – for some miracle or gift – had the power to alleviate tensions and prevent wars.” (SCHWARCZ & STARLING, 2018, p. 30, *our translation*).

The topic of “*innate tolerance*” is largely explored by Stefan Zweig, for whom Brazil had always experienced peace even in times of political and social unrest. In this way, he asserts that:

It is a country which hates war; even more, it has hardly ever experienced it. [...] Brazil for more than a century has settled all border disputes by pacific agreement or through an international court of arbitration. Generals are neither the pride of Brazil nor her heroes; but rather statesmen like Rio Branco, who knew how to prevent war by reasoning and conciliation. (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 12)

What Zweig was doing is criticizing the European concept of civilization. For him, the kind of society that the old continent had pursued in the last – nineteenth - century had proved to be a failure in moral and human terms:

But the events of recent years have considerably changed our opinions concerning the meaning of the words “*civilization*” and “*culture*”. We are no longer ready to parallel them with the words “*organization*” and “*comfort*”. (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 11)

While the success of a nation was measured in terms of wealth and productivity, military strength, and industrial development it did not take into consideration what he called: “*the human way of thinking*,” which he affirms “*to be the truest criterion for the measurement of culture and civilization*” (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 11). Humanity in its ethos as opposed to “*organization*” is what the humanist valorized the most. Once high levels of social organization had not sufficed to prevent Europe to go through two world wars within a quarter of a century (ZWEIG, 1941).

Brazil, instead, represented in the collective imaginary of nations a land that desired peace. Even when dealing with internal order disruptions Brazilian governments had always used the same methods to solve them,

Both in its domestic and in its foreign politics it has unswervingly shown the same principle, reflecting the soul of millions: a peaceful settlement of all conflicts by mutual tolerance. Never by its own development has it disturbed that of the world – indeed, if anything it has furthered it. (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 78)

This was no accident, it was rather the “*natural product of a people’s character, the innate tolerance of the Brazilian, which again and again has proved itself in the course of history.*” (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 12).

Looking at it in another way, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (2014) presents us the “cordial man”. In this sense, the cordial man is a representation of the Brazilian ethos to what Zweig called “innate tolerance”. Nonetheless, contrary to what may be imagined, the notion of cordiality - that generally implies gentleness, softness in speaking, hospitability, generosity, and other virtues that the common-sense generically attributes to Brazilian character – does not necessarily mean politeness in any sense of the word. In fact, by its own definition, the cordial man opposes all rules of formal behavior.

Moreover, the dimension of cordiality, as defined by Holanda, is more an expression of the private sphere of life - that emanates to the exterior of the individual - than the public one. The sociologist describes this attitude as an aspect of the deep-rooted patriarchal relations in Brazilian society. Thus, in Brazil, the limits of the family circle and the state are almost completely ignored within the realm of social life.

Because of this difficulty to distinguish between what is public and what is private, this “individual type”, the Brazilian, can only with a great effort assimilate modern sociality. That is why the forms of social relations that have always prevailed in society are based upon domestic rationalities.

Take for instance, the fierce desire to establish intimate connections when confronted with highly hierarchical structures. Or, to put in another way, the tendencies among Brazilians to use sentences in the diminutive grammatical form when speaking or, even, the use of forename instead of family name when referring to an authority or someone else. It is only in this sense, that Holanda make his famous statement about the cordial man: “the Brazilian contribution for civilization will be the cordiality – we shall give the world the cordial man” (HOLANDA, 2020, p. 176) - or, as he asserts forward, “‘the cordial man’: is the most living and natural form converted into formula” (HOLANDA, 2020, p. 177).

Therefore, what Stefan Zweig identified as the native or “innate tolerance” as “the product of a people’s character” - an opposition to hostility and war – is nothing but “familism” being put into practice. That is the imbrication of family and public spheres of life. As Lilia Schwarcz and Heloisa Starling (2015) highlights, Brazil has had many conflicts, insurrections, and revolt movements throughout national history. So, “we are and are not, the ambiguity being more productive than a bunch of official frozen images.” (SCHWARCZ & STARLING, 2015, p. 18).

According to Zweig, another product of the encounter between these three different races – Indigenous, European, and African - was the process of miscegenation. For the author Brazil’s most important contribution to the world was the “systematic dissolution of separate racial and national groups (...)” (1941, p. 9). For him, the success of miscegenation in Brazil could be seen in society manifested in the form of “an absolute civil equality in public as well as in private life” (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 8), from the peripheries to the high levels of society, government and academy. According to him,

the Brazilian nation for centuries has been built upon the principle of a free and unsuppressed miscegenation, the complete equalization of black and white, brown and yellow. [...] There is no colour-bar, no segregation, no arrogant classification [...] (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 8)

In this way, the author narrates, and more than that, praises the country for the assimilation of different people inside its territory. Zweig (1941) will indeed narrate how, from colonial times to the times of republic, Brazil would have been hosting a myriad of different groups one after the other. First, the native peoples, who since immemorial times have been inhabiting the country. Then, when the Portuguese colonized the country, they brought with them millions of Negroes from Africa. Later came the Germans, the Japanese, and the Italian settlers. All of these people lived peacefully together with all the others who lived in the far-removed parts, such as the “barqueiros who navigate the rivers”, the “caboclos in the Amazon district”, the “garimpeiros, the diamond seekers”, the “cattle-breeders, the vaqueros and the gauchos”, “the workers on the rubber plantations in the jungle, the seringueiros”, and of the “baraqueiros of Minas Geraes” (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 5), a land that is able to manage progress with traditional ways of living.

The mixture stemming from such amalgamation of peoples, in constituting the Brazilian population, was fundamental for “cementing national culture” (1941, p. 9). Indeed, he asserts that “[o]n this foundation a nation has been building itself up, slowly but surely, for four hundred years” (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 9). On this matter, one of the most influential Brazilian sociologists of all times, Gilberto Freyre, would agree with Zweig’s argument.

In *The Masters and the Slaves (Casa Grande e Senzala, 1933)*, Gilberto Freyre describes the encounter between Portuguese, Indigenous and African people as a military and economic confront in which the former subdued the latter. Nonetheless, in order to advance the colonial enterprise in the new found land, male European descents started to relate sexually with the female native Indians and later with enslaved girls brought from Africa. According to Freyre (2006), the absence of white women in the new world created a “fraternity zone” between conquerors and conquered, *the masters and the slaves*.

Gilberto Freyre (2006) attributed this to what he called the Portuguese capacity of miscibility. In this view, when the Iberian settlers came to colonize the land in the continent, the Portuguese already had experienced the process of colonization in the tropics for almost a century. According to him, the success of the colonial machine in the country had to do with the economic system based upon monoculture; a social hierarchy anchored in the patriarchal family; the provision of labor offered by African enslaved workers; and finally, the union between the Portuguese and indigenous women.

This social and highly hierarchized engine was the basis for the primitive construction of modern Brazil. As the author asserts,

In tropical America was formed an agrarian society in structure, enslaver in the technique of economic exploitation, [made] hybrid by Indian – and later negro – in composition. (FREYRE, 2006, p. 65, *our translation*)

As Gilberto Freyre further explains, the characteristic of a hybrid and slave-based colonization in Brazil can in part be explained by the “ethnic past” of the Iberian Peninsula. A people geographically and culturally divided between two continents, Europe and Africa, given their proximities. Freyre does not despise the fact that,

African traditions deeply influenced European institutions such as their religion, culture, and even sexual life.

The influences Africa exerted upon Europe is a legacy of the Moorish conquest over the continent. The wars between Christians and Muslims that for about eight centuries prevailed upon Northern Africa and Central Europe marked their social, military, and economic configuration throughout their history. In other words, “The culture and ethnic indecision between Europe and Africa seem to have been always the same in Portugal like in other parts of the peninsula.” (FREYRE, 2006, p. 67).

Nonetheless, Freyre asserts that other people exerted great influence upon the Portuguese, the Semitic people. The Jews throughout their history of settlement in Europe had demonstrated huge capacities of mobility and adaptability for the social and physical environment that were present in the DNA of the Lusitanos of the 15th century. In this way, the element of mobility granted Portugal their victory over immense parts of the planet (in Asia, Africa, and the America) even disposing of a considerably small population.

According to Freyre, if the lack of capital-labor was posed as an impediment for the Portuguese enterprise, they compensated this “disadvantage” by procreating with women from the lands in which they had just established. The small amounts of men in the metropole resulted in the choice of intercourse with the native women, ensuing in a

genetic activity that had as much of violently instinctive on the side of the individual as it had of political, of calculated, of stimulated by evident economic and political reasons on the side of the State. (FREYRE, 2006, p. 70, *our translation*)

What in other words Freyre calls miscibility, he further stated that,

*Quanto à miscibilidade, nenhum povo colonizador, dos modernos, excedeu ou sequer se igualou neste ponto aos portugueses. Foi misturando-se gostosamente com mulheres de cor logo ao primeiro contato e multiplicando-se em filhos mestiços que uns milhares apenas de machos atrevidos conseguiram firmar-se na posse de terras vastíssimas e competir com povos grandes na extensão de domínio colonial e na eficácia de ação colonizadora.*⁸ (FREYRE, 2006, p. 70)

It is in this sense that, Gilberto Freyre asserts, the conviviality of the Portuguese with different peoples that throughout history inhabited the Iberian Peninsula prepared the Portuguese to maintain social and sexual relations with Brazilian Indians. Freyre evokes the idea of the “enchanted Moorish”, a delightful woman of brown skin and black eyes who exerted a mystical attraction upon the Saracens and that occupied the imagination of the Portuguese. She was later personified in the figure of the beautiful Indigenous woman described by Caminha when they met for the first time.

⁸ Unfortunately, it was not possible to incorporate a translated version of this passage to the text nor have I had access to the English translations of this paragraph.

The last characteristic to have influenced the Portuguese colonization in Brazil and, consequently, the formation of its people was acclimatization. The conditions of the weather and the soil in Portugal were favorable to agriculture as much as it was for the plantations in the tropical countries. Therefore, the colonial enterprise that was established in Brazil had, according to Gilberto Freyre, all the necessary elements (mobility, miscibility, and acclimatization) to give birth to a new country, a new people, and a new nation.

Stefan Zweig recognized the influence of miscegenation in surpassing racial barriers and unifying the nation. However, he cannot conceal the superiority he attributes to the role of European civilization in this process. For instance, in the second chapter of the book, Zweig refers to the immigration laws that were promoted in Brazil since the abolition was proclaimed in 1888 as a step forward to increase the country's labor capacity. For him, the influx of white European immigrants had the positive effect of elevating the cultural and ethnological status of the nation. In this way, he wrote that,

This immigration of about four to five million whites during the last fifty years has had an enormously vitalizing effect on Brazil, accompanied by considerable cultural and ethnological advantages. The Brazilian race, whose complexion had been tending toward the probability of becoming increasingly dark and African through three hundred years of importation of negroes, is growing visibly lighter; and, in contrast to the illiterate slaves, the European element helps to raise the general level of civilization. (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 122)

Although Zweig tries not to show partiality at the beginning of the book over the "superiority" of the European civilization it becomes clearer as one reads his text that he not only considered the European to be in a higher-level of - social, moral, and economic development, but he also considered it important to prevent Brazil to become "increasingly dark and African". The immigration from Europe of about four to five million people had in his understanding the effect of making Brazil stronger, more varied, and lighter.

The history of Brazil shows that the land always had an imperative impetus for cheap labor availability for the exploitation of national wealth, "men for Brazil! Men at all costs!" (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 121). The human force was always the most demanded capital in the market. From the very beginning of colonization, Brazil imported regular amounts of 'black ivory' from Africa, its most precious good, the people. For three hundred years, Brazil smuggled millions of slaves in horrible conditions in the "*tumbeiros*" ships – or as Stefan Zweig describes them "nightmare ships" (1941, p. 91) - many of which died on board in the way to the "new world".

For almost four centuries the slave trade was one of the most profitable economic activities in the colony and later in the empire. The high cost of acquiring a negro was compensated by the long hours he spent working without salary. A slave is also an investment for in the free time he is reproducing and "increasing the property of his master" (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 92). Zweig asserts that,

Until far into the nineteenth century the ever-increasing mass of slaves are the real pillars of national economy. On their shoulders rests the weight of colonial production, while the Portuguese, as civil

servants, officials, and business men, direct the course of the machine kept going by these millions of black arms. (ZWEIG, 1941, 92)

The labor force incorporated to production only with great difficulties was absorbed by society. Although treating the theme of miscegenation and slavery as fundamentally important for nationality, Zweig neglects the role of black people in constituting the social history of the country. Throughout the narration, the author emphasizes European culture but commonly refers to black people or African descents as unskilled laborers. He did not make many considerations about their contributions to politics, economy, and culture. Even though he does some assertions,

No amount of research can alter this fact, and if today one were to claim such dances as the samba and the macumba to be of Brazilian origin, one would be falsifying the real situation; because these dances and rites have been imported with the African slaves with their chains. (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 137)

The Eurocentrism present in the work of Stefan Zweig did not go unnoticed by its critics. David Fontanals calls our attention to Eurocentric preconceptions that permeate *Brazil, land of the Future*. Fontanals acknowledges that “the text is underpinned to a large extent by Eurocentrism, primitivism and even, to some extent, racism” (2019, p. 187). David Fontanals investigates the concepts of idealism and utopia in Zweig’s work or what he calls his “European Utopia”.

Departing from Stefan Zweig’s autobiography *The World of Yesterday* (*Die Welt von Gestern*), published in 1942, Fontanals sought to inform the author’s “ultimate legacy”, that is “his commitment to an idea of the world (*Weltanschauung*) and an ethical project that, although it had been defeated by violence and war, could still be reenacted by future generations” (2019, p. 180). As David Fontanals elucidates, prior to his ideas about Brazil, Zweig had different ideas concerning a “supranational European community, based on freedom, peace, cosmopolitanism, tolerance, common understanding, and pluralism (...)” (2019, p. 180).

Hence, one must bear in mind that Zweig was thinking about – when writing his autobiography as well as *Brazil, land of the future* - the construction of an ideal community. In this way, one should see Stefan Zweig’s utopia as a potential space for articulating his commitment (FONTANALS, 2019). In other words, *Brazil, land of the future* is “A Eurocentric text that questions Eurocentrism, an interpretation of Brazil that combines bewilderment and fascination, cultural alterity and cosmopolitanism” (JOSIOWICZ & MAIO, 2020, p. 193).

Doing justice to Stefan Zweig and his laudatory work about Brazil – its people, culture, and history -, he asserts in a conclusive statement in the third chapter,

Those same nations which today are fighting each other senselessly on the other side of the ocean have found a common home of peace here. If – and this is the greatest comfort in moments of despair – the civilization of our Old World should destroy itself in its suicidal struggle, we must always remember that there is a new one springing up... a new civilization ready to put into effect everything which in Europe the most high-minded, intellectual generations hoped for and dreamed about in vain: a humane and peaceful culture. (ZWEIG, 1941, p. 165)

In a nutshell, “Zweig’s idealism, which had earned him so many reapproaches and condemnations [by his critics], was based on the belief in the power of ideas and art to transcend both time and space” (FONTANALS, 2019, p. 181).

Zweig’s idealism takes place in Brazil based on the assumption that, contrary to Europe, Brazilian society knew how to deal with the problems of racism and nationalism. Instead of causing conflicts, the presence of multiple nationalities and races in the country resulted in peaceful and harmonious coexistence among individuals of different origins. It set the basis for the creation and consolidation of Brazilian national culture.

The debates around nationality in Brazil were an ongoing topic in the days of Stefan Zweig. From the 1920s to the 1940s many books were published discussing the Brazilian identity in the form of essays that marked the social thought of the time. An important matter for the thinkers of those days was the influence of the process of colonization over the development of society in the context of modernization.

Above all, these intellectuals were concerned with the formation of national identity under the influence of hundreds of years of miscegenation, colonialism, and slavery. How it influenced the process of creating Brazilian national identity and its implications for the development of concepts such as racial democracy will be discussed in the next part of this article.

2. FROM THE FRONT PORCH TO THE IVORY TOWER: racial democracy discussions in Brazilian social sciences

In this section, I will discuss the means that led to the consolidation of the so-called racial democracy myth. Emphasizing the role of intellectual elites in the prevalence of such an idea. I also state that those who collaborated with this debate, such as Gilberto Freyre, were not unaware of the exclusionist and sometimes violent dimensions in the hierarchical relations among races. Instead, he identified possibilities for cooperation in “fraternity zones”. Which if did not exclude racism in all its instances from society, at least restrained its impetus from growing stronger.

The pursuit of a nationalist identity in the 1930s and 1940s by intellectuals, academics, and politicians played an important role in the production of interpretations about Brazil. In this regard, the academic production of this time is featured by the methodological choice over the use of essayist analysis. These essays of interpretation were works of an early sociological stage generally referred to as Brazilian social thought.

The debates around racial relations in Brazilian society were a sensitive topic for the social sciences encapsulating the scientific agenda of this period. The contention around race versus social class problems as the rooting causes of Brazil’s underdevelopment surrounded the ongoing discussions of the time.

In this way, after the abolition was proclaimed in Brazil, millions of people who had been enslaved for four hundred years suddenly became new citizens, or so it was thought. Although the *Lei Áurea* issued on May 13th, 1888, granted liberty to the slaves it did not provide them the means to survive. That is one of the reasons why even after losing the chains many of them remained bound to their former masters (DOMINGUES, 2005).

With the establishment of the Republic, a new constitution was signed in 1891, but the problem persisted. Even though blacks and whites were considered equal before the law and had in theory access to the same public goods, they were essentially different in terms of opportunities. According to the law, illiterate citizens had no rights to vote or to be voted, thus, excluding the vast majority of the black population from political rights (DOMINGUES, 2005).

This situation created a social gap between people along racialized lines, once it favored the ones who already had privileges as against those whose rights had always been denied. In legal terms blacks and whites were under the same conditions but they did not have the same opportunities (DOMINGUES, 2005). In this context, the myth of racial democracy is institutionalized in the country, becoming the official ideology in policy-making in the years to come. According to Petrônio Domingues, racial democracy can be defined as: “a racial system deprived of any legal or institutional barrier for racial equality, and, in a certain way, a racial system deprived of any prejudice or discriminatory manifestation” (2005, p. 116, *our translation*).

In other words, the myth rested upon the premise that there was no legal barrier preventing black people’s social ascension. This was an idea largely spread in the United States and Europe, according to this view, a negro in Brazil could become an official or reach a position of prestige in society without intuitional constraints (GUIMARÃES, 2001a). This proposition supported the assumption that in Brazil there was neither discrimination nor racism.

Domingues points out at least three factors that contributed to the historical consolidation of racial democracy as a national ideology, that can be traced back to the nineteenth century. First, the literature produced by foreigners who visited the country contributed to constructing an image of a racial paradise in Brazil (DOMINGUES, 2005), such is the case of Stefan Zweig and many other scientists, naturalists, and artists alike. According to Freyre (2006), this kind of literature was a rich source of information on the social history of Brazil.

It is worth mentioning, the construction of a “racial paradise” image about the current situation in Brazil since the end of the nineteenth century by European and North American travelers was in fierce opposition with the attitude adopted by the dominant elites. For the ruling classes, the massive presence of black slaves in the constitution of a mixed-race people was an obstacle to the insertion of the nation into modernity (MAIO, 1999).

Yet, another important factor in the maintenance of this ideology was the work of the intellectual and political elites. For instance, the position held by Joaquim Nabuco, a Brazilian abolitionist activist, was that slavery did not spoil the relationship between master and slaves nor created a state of enmity between them (NABUCO,

1883 *apud* DOMINGUES, 2005). In this regard, the positions assumed by the abolitionist movement also set the bases upon which the myth was built.

Last but not least, the alleged historical process of miscegenation between the three races (FREYRE, 2006) – the Indigenous, the Portuguese, and the African -, was an indicator of the high degree of ethnic tolerance (DOMINGUES, 2005). The abhorrent promiscuous exploitation by the white masters with his slaves is believed to be evidence of the absence of discrimination between blacks and whites. Miscegenation was a synonym of strong racial relations, although it did not nullify the discrimination and intolerance the white man felt for the negro, as Petrônio Domingues (2005) indicates.

The long-sustained idea that in Brazil there were no such things as racism and discrimination, hatred or enmity between individuals of different races was favorable to the ruling elites in the post-abolition moment (Domingues, 2005). This condition dismantled all the possibilities of retaliation the freedman could impose upon his master. It also nullified the possibility of further policy compensations by the State to the ex-slaves and their descendants. Besides, it took the responsibilities away from the owners with their former slaves.

It is only at the turn of the century that the idea of miscegenation as a derogatory principle will change. Due to the social, economic, and political transformations the country went through and the willingness of the *intelligentsia* to consolidate the national identity of the country that a different perspective will be developed between the 1920s and the 1940s. The pessimistic perception of miscegenation was left behind all for a positive approach towards the racial intercourse between different races and nationalities. Miscegenation becomes a synonym of harmony and tolerance (MAIO, 1999).

Antonio Candido (1967), one of Brazil's main literary critics, wrote that the men of his generation whose interest in the country had been cultivated owe it to the reading of three books: *The Masters & the Slaves*, by Gilberto Freyre; *Roots of Brazil* written by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda; and Caio Prado Júnior's *Formação do Brasil Contemporâneo*. These reference books and their respective authors were part of a larger tradition of interpreters of Brazil which combined analytical strength with a meticulous descriptive capacity in bringing light to some of the country's most disputed topics.

These books are inscribed in the context of the essayist tradition of interpretations of Brazil, which can hardly be defined in terms of form and content. The interpreters wrote about multiple dimensions of Brazilian politics, culture, economy, and society using different approaches and bearing in mind distinctive ideologies. It can be argued that this methodology became popular among Brazilian intellectuals in 1920 with the first publication of *Populações Meridionais do Brasil* written by Francisco José Oliveira Viana (BOTELHO, 2010). Following the same tradition, other influential works were published until the end of the 1940s when this methodology was discredited with the institutionalization of social science departments.

Recurrently, the referred tradition is uniformed by a central characteristic that encompasses their multiple analysis, that is the problem of "national identity".

According to André Botelho, “the social formation self-interpretation and, so, the search for ‘national identity’ are placed, for many, in the very roots of the essays of Brazil’s interpretation” (2010, p. 49, *our translation*). But Botelho raises some objections to this idea, for him, it is not possible to encompass all the essayist academic production from 1920-1940 under the same criteria, that of a search for “national identity”. In the 1970s and 1980s, however, this kind of analytical production was disregarded as a mere ideology also contributing to the oblivion if not the discredit of its authors.

Nonetheless, Antonio Guimarães (2001b) states that modern Brazil is a product of the last seventy years⁹. The specialized literature commonly affirms that the turning point is marked by the revolutionary movement known as Revolução de 1930 with the end of the First Republic (1889-1929). The advent of the Estado Novo (1937-1945) and the Second Republic (1945-1964) characterized the emergence of the *povo brasileiro* [Brazilian people]. In the Semana de Arte Moderna in 1922 led by modernist artists and literature writers, Brazil will seek to consolidate its national identity which will only be accomplished by social scientists' writings such as Gilberto Freyre, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, and Caio Prado Júnior's publications (GUIMARÃES, 2001b).

In this way, Gilberto Freyre's *The Masters & the Slaves*, one of the most important books inscribed within the essayist tradition of interpretation of Brazil, brought new light to the concept of miscegenation in the Brazilian horizon. The author defines it as an essay about “genetical sociology” and “social history” with which he aims to interpret the most important aspects in the formation of the Brazilian family (FREYRE, 2006, p. 50). For instance, Darcy Ribeiro states that,

Indeed, *The Masters & the Slaves* is the greatest of all Brazilian books and the most Brazilian of all the essays we have written. [...] I believe we could pass without any of those essays and romances, even though it was the best one written in Brazil. [...] *The Masters and The Slaves* is, no doubts, an achievement of the Brazilian culture, just as it was seen from the very beginning. (RIBEIRO, 2017, p. 12, *our translation*)

Nonetheless, the author and his work are involved in a lot of controversies. At the same time, Freyre is referred to as an anti-racist but is also accused of being the main promoter of the so-called “racial democracy” myth and is similarly accountable for helping to perpetuate race discrimination in Brazil (GUIMARÃES, 2001b; MOURA E SILVA, 2005; LEHMANN, 2008).

In the trilogy written by Gilberto Freyre (*The Masters & the Slaves: a study in the development of Brazilian civilization* (1933); *The Mansions and the shanties: the making of modern Brazil [Sobrados e Mucambos]* (1936); and, *Ordem e Progresso* (1959)) on the topic of private life and racial relations in Brazil, he never mentioned racial democracy¹⁰. Yet, the specialized literature commonly attributes the terminology

⁹ The article was published in 2001.

¹⁰ David Lehmann (2008) acknowledges that Freyre did use the term racial democracy on some occasions, frequently, when addressing English-speaking crowds in lectures overseas, declaring that Brazil was on its way to becoming a racial democracy. In the British translation of *The Mansions and the Shanties*, he inserted a similar statement.

to him, but it was not until the 1950s that the term started to spread (GUIMARÃES, 2001a). Although Freyre (2006, p. 33) talks about “social democratization” in Brazil referring to the condition of miscegenation, the first time we find him using the expression “racial democracy” was only in 1962 when the idea was already a consensus among the national *intelligentsia* (GUIMARÃES, 2001a).

So, how can Gilberto Freyre be taken as the responsible for disseminating the myth and what are the implications of this position? What were the tendencies and debates in society, especially in the academic domains, which led to the consolidation of this idea? It is important to step back for a moment and look for evidences that corroborate this idea.

One of the consensuses regarding the consolidation of the alleged racial democracy was the prevalent idea among scholars and even black activists that the kind of slavery system that operated in Brazil was less harmful than the one experienced in the United States for example (DOMINGUES, 2005). The North-American abolitionist movements which in the nineteenth century studied the two historical experiences concluded that the relations practiced among masters and slaves was surpassed by a certain softness in the Brazilian reality when compared to the treatments with African Americans and their descendants (MOURA E SILVA, 2005). It is important to remember that from the end of the XIX century to the beginning of XX century the *Jim Crow Laws* were validated in the US as a legal and institutional system of segregation (DOMINGUES, 2005).

This argument was also largely sustained by foreign literature produced by observers who entered the country since the arrival of the royal family in 1808. These eye-witnesses' testimonies are appointed as one of the main causes to sustain the favorable argument towards racial democracy. Petrônio Domingues declares that,

They generally described a friendly and benevolent master towards his slaves, a sweet, soft, and lovely slavery. The relation between the master and the slave, in this way, was established upon strong ties of generosity, sweetness, and intimacy, characteristics that racially democratized the system. (DOMINGUES, 2005, p. 120, *our translation*)

For instance, Louis Couty, a French voyager, (1988 *apud* Domingues, 2005) tells us some of his impressions about racial relations in Brazil in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, all freedmen were treated as equals, within a context of no racial prejudice, where interracial unions were supported giving birth to a large mixed-race population. Not only that, but these miscegenated groups were completely integrated with the whites. This kind of relation could be seen in all the spheres of society from private life to public areas such as the army, the legislative assembly, schools, theaters, and in all the public administration¹¹.

As we have seen, from the end of the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth century, Brazil was known as a miscegenated country. This assumption was largely supported by social scientists, naturalists, and politicians who applied evolutionist theories to study individuals, such as *Social Darwinism*, as was done in

¹¹ Stefan Zweig made a very similar description in the 1940s about the positions occupied by black and brown skin citizens in the social rankings, see p. 12.

natural sciences (SCHWARCZ, 1994). The publication of *The Master and the Slaves* was a turning point in this view. Although Gilberto Freyre was still discussing miscegenation, he adopted a new approach concerning its role on the constitution of the Brazilian population.

In Freyre's view, the often-spoken historical process of miscegenation was not responsible for the alleged "decay" or "degeneration" of races. Instead, the perceived effects of malnutrition and constant illness that prevailed upon the bodies of the negro slaves as opposed to the white masters were attributed to the economic model based on landowning monoculture. A colony of exploitation oriented to yield a unique product – in this case, sugar cane to be exported to the metropole - had few other nutritious options, which combined with a fierce, if not mortal, abuse of human labor led the population to starvation and death. Therefore, the "miscegenation" was not a factor causing races to be "inferior", this was a result of other unequal forces operating through a rooted racist and exclusionist arrangement of society.

In this way, the big-house where white masters lived with their family embodied a wide code of patriarchal relations that also encapsulated other social, economic, and political dimensions of society. For instance, it dictated the kind of production and labor, the means of transport, religion, and etc. In this way, "The big-houses were to this day where the Brazilian character was best expressed; our social continuity." (FREYRE, 2006, p. 45, *our translation*).

Nonetheless, he is straightforward in affirming that the relation between white men and black women was permeated by a thick hierarchical structure marked by subordination between the race considered superior and the one deemed inferior. In spite of this violent practice, the essayist concludes that,

The miscegenation that was largely practiced here settled the social distance that otherwise would be conserved between the big-house and the tropical forest; between the big-house and the slave quarters. (FREYRE, 2006, p. 33, *our translation*)

For Gilberto Freyre, the economic system based upon monoculture and black enslavement had formed a stratified aristocratical society that was only opposed by the social effects of miscegenation. Thus, resulting, in his own words, in a "social democracy" working in Brazil, opening space for one to speak of "racial democracy".

Thus, to him, it was never a matter of racism or not. He always recognized the presence of hierarchical structures in the relations between blacks and whites which considered the ones superior to the others. What he indeed affirmed is that the miscegenation based upon interracial relations between white men and black women, Europeans and indigenous girls, created in the particular case of Brazil, "fraternity zones". Ultimately, these new-formed social spaces allowed the conviviality of different races – and, later, different nationalities -, but it did not suppress the racial or ethnic components that stood between them.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that Freyre considered the enslavement practiced by the Portuguese conquerors not to be as harmful towards their slaves as it really was, "[...] on the other hand the European colonizer was the best to fraternize with the so-called inferior races. The less cruel in his relations with the slaves." (FREYRE, 2006, p. 265, *our translation*). Mateus L. de A. Moura e Silva (2005),

however, asserts that it by no means allows the acceptance of a pacific environment by the author, “his interest rest upon ‘zones of proximity’ between ethnical and cultural inheritances so diverse as constitutive of our national identity.” (MOURA E SILVA, 2005, n.p, *our translation*).

If we cannot find a direct reference to the concept of racial democracy in the books of Gilberto Freyre, we will find it for the first time in the specialized literature in the works of the anthropologist Charles Wagley, “O Brazil é renomado mundialmente por sua democracia racial” [“Brazil is worldly renowned for its racial democracy”] (WAGLEY, 1952 *apud* GUIMARÃES, 2001b, p. 148). In the research conducted by Antonio Guimarães he also found out that Abdias do Nascimento is also among the first to have used the expression in his speech to the *I Congresso do Negro Brasileiro* in 1950.

Abdias do Nascimento was a leading black activist in charge of an intellectual circuit embodied in the *Teatro Experimental do Negro* (TEN), an experimental theater company with a strong racial consciousness. In addition to that, the thinkers who joined the TEN were mainly concerned with pursuing a national identity representative of the nation’s culture and people, to advance a democratic order in opposition to the autocratic state represented by the *Estado Novo* led by the president Getúlio Vargas¹². They shared some ideas with nationalist thinkers who were among the proponents of an economic and social order predominantly Brazilian.

One of the ideas shared between these groups was the consensus around racial democracy. For instance, Antonio Guimarães points out that in the occasion of the *Semana de Estudos sobre Relações de Raça* [Week Study on Racial Relations], held on May 13th 1955, the TEN reiterated the following position: “considering that Brazil is a national community where is held the most advanced patterns of racial democracy, despite the survival, among us, of some remnant discrimination” (NASCIMENTO, 1968, p. 56 *apud* GUIMARÃES, 2001b, p. 150, *our translation*).

On the other hand, however, the black movements had their own considerations regarding the racial situation in Brazil. If some of them had agreed to some degree with the held consensus around racial democracy, they also disagreed with the intellectual *establishment* concerning the abolition and the existence of racism in society (GUIMARÃES, 2001b). For them, the abolition was not a guarantee of the negro integration into the social and economic order.

As Guimarães (2001b, p. 151) asserts, a “second abolition” was a necessary following step to the fulfillment and realization of racial democracy in Brazil, “to speak of racial democracy meant the full right to something not materialized”. In this way, Guimarães makes a distinction between a progressive consideration regarding racial democracy and a conservative one. The progressive approach, especially considering the political mobilization of black movements, represented a right to something that could be claimed on their behalf as a reaffirmed value. On the other hand, the

¹² According to Guimarães (2001a, p. 151), in the 1950s the employment of the term “democracy” was an imperative among politicians in Brazil. The anti-fascist and authoritative struggles that marked the post-war era around the globe were also to influence in the national level strengthening the “democratic consensus”.

understanding of racial democracy as something not yet materialized could be interpreted as a subjective opinion and not as a fact by the conservatives.

Antonio Guimarães makes a clear distinction between black intellectuals linked to social movements and the cultural *establishment* of the Second Republic. Guimarães highlights two main points of divergence between these groups: firstly, a critique of the exotic treatment conferred to the negroes by social sciences; and, secondly, a critique for the denial of racism in Brazil by white intellectuals.

In this way, Petrônio Domingues and Antonio Guimarães agree on two main points regarding the prevalence of the creed of racial democracy among Brazilian *intelligentsia* and society in general. First, both acknowledge that the idea that there were no legal or institutional barriers for the social ascension of black people was accepted in Brazil. Secondly, the already mentioned belief that, contrary to other countries' historical experiences, the treatment of slaves in Brazil was more human and cordial.

These ideas prevailed in Brazil from the middle of the 1930s to the beginning of the 1950s in different levels of society but mainly among white thinkers and scholars. Ultimately, the concept of racial democracy as an ideal pursued by society was considered not one of the race but of social class. If he was not able to fit in the economic demands of the labor market that (was in theory) not because of his racial inheritance but because of his lack of abilities. As Domingues affirms,

Any manifestation of racial prejudice against black people was also justified as a product of class differences. In this way, the inequalities between blacks and whites were not conceived as coming from racial injustices, but [were] understood as a result of differences of economic and social order among classes. (DOMINGUES, 2005, p. 123, *our translation*)

In this sense, Domingues goes even further on the matter of class vs racial relations and their implications to social ascension and collective consciousness. He considers that instead of vanquishing racism from society it only reinforced the creative forces of a held belief. At once he asserts that,

[...] the racial democracy myth was able to insert in the mind of the negro that the solution for the illness produced by exclusion was individual and had nothing to do with the collective struggle to transform the racial system. When a negro, individually, broke up with the racial barrier, it did not nullify, but reinforced the myth, since his action represented a conformed acceptance to the game rules imposed by the white. (DOMINGUES, 2005, P. 126, *our translation*)

Of course, not everybody agreed with that; new exponent voices will appear in the debate especially from the 1940s onwards with the establishment of the so-called *Escola Sociológica Paulista* (or São Paulo School of Sociology). The racial relations in Brazil and the “problem of the negro” were central to the discussions being developed by sociologists at the University of São Paulo (IANNI, 2004). In this way, the works of Roger Bastide e Florestan Fernandes were very sensible in addressing the established consensus evolving around racial democracy. Their research projects were

conducted as part of an international effort lead by UNESCO to investigate the racial situation in the country, considered, once again, as a different experience in world history from that of the United States and South Africa, for example.

The sociologist, Octavio Ianni was a close collaborator of Roger Bastide and Florestan Fernandes. He explained in an interview in 2004 to the renowned literary critic, Alfredo Bosi, that the international organization (UNESCO) was deeply impressed by the thesis of racial democracy in Brazil. And that was, no doubts, the main reason why the organization decided to conduct its field research on the matter in Brazil. This was especially engaging in a context in which ideological and military battles, who devastated Europe and other parts of the world, were strongly influenced by Nazism and fascist movements' "racial purity" ideologies.

In this sense, Ianni highlights the aforementioned argument that in Brazil we had class prejudice; racial prejudice being only one more element to influence that reality – all of which was considered a product of Gilberto Freyre's works, as he reaffirms (IANNI, 2004). The studies conducted by Florestan Fernandes and Roger Bastide were elucidative to the irrevocable dilemma of racial *versus* class prejudice making clear that the former was an intrinsic characteristic of the constitution of our society.

For Bastide and Fernandes, more than any other thing, the racial democracy was an "ideal pattern of behavior" (GUIMARÃES, 2001b, p. 152). That is, a social norm that was in consonance with the racial prejudice expressed in reality, "which may have contradictory, concomitant, and not necessarily excluding existences" (GUIMARÃES, 2001b, p. 152, *our translation*). In this regard, Octavio Ianni made an important assertion, he says,

[...] how is it possible to affirm and reaffirm the racial democracy in a country in which political democratic experiences are scarce and that social democracy, if it even exists, is incipient? This is at least a contradiction, a paradox in a country with a slavery background, autocratic, with accentuated cycles of authoritarianism. (IANNI, 2004, p. 14)

Ianni corroborates the idea that, the myth of racial democracy serves the political and social interests of ruling elites. In the end, Ianni reiterates, it turns into a technique of political power, of dominance and alienation over people of other color. Abdias do Nascimento afterwards said that, "the racial status, manipulated by the white, prevents the negro from acquiring consciousness of the *advantage* that in Brazil is called racial and color democracy." (NASCIMENTO, 1968, p. 22 *apud* GUIMARÃES, 2001b, p. 155, *our translation and emphasis*)¹³.

In the 1960s Brazil was to experience another *coup d'état* sponsored by a military regime putting an end to the Second Republic (1945-1964). The death of the democratic period also dismantled the long-sustained ideal of racial democracy among

¹³ "O status da raça, manipulado pelos brancos, impede que o negro tome consciência do *logro* que no Brasil chamam de democracia racial e de cor." (NASCIMENTO, 1968, p. 22 *apud* GUIMARÃES, 2001b, p. 155, *emphasis*).

social scientists to give place to the myth, as a form of opposition to the “official” ideology preached by the militaries (GUIMARÃES, 2001b).

That is until the 1950s racial democracy was an ideal shared by academics and intellectuals alike who believed in its validity. With the implementation of the UNESCO Project and the finds resulting from the research, the concept was discredited by social scientists as a myth. Nonetheless, it was assumed by the military government as an official ideology that based the racial status of the nation during the years that they remained in power.

If by one side the nationalism of the Second Republic incorporated the negro to the labor force of the country, institutionalizing the racial democracy consensus. On the other side, with the end of the Second Republic by the implementation of a military regime, racial democracy is seen as nothing but mere ideology by social scientists who no longer considered its validity (GUIMARÃES, 2001a).

3. TRIAL AND ERROR: the UNESCO agenda for Brazil

In 1951 and 1952 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) sponsored a research on the topic of racial relations in Brazil. According to Marcos Chor Maio (1999), the research program aimed to present Brazil to the world as a successful example in the field of racial relations. The Brazilian social experience in the ethnic realm was considered a singular case of racial harmony appreciated for domestic and international viewers.

The program showed a diversified image of racial relations in Brazil and also promoted the emergence of new approaches of interpretation to Brazilian society in the context of modernization and industrialization (*ibidem*, p. 141). The effort of investigation resulted in the improvement and shaping of Brazilian social sciences in the 1950s.

The joint research program commonly referred to as UNESCO Project took place due to the alignment of the international organization demands and the questions posed by the emergent field of social sciences in Brazil, as stated by Maio (1999). A fortunate arrangement of circumstances influenced the overall process. Created in November, 1945 by an amendment signed in the United Nations General Conference, UNESCO purpose is to,

contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science, and culture to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law, and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations. (UNESCO, 2020 [1945], p. 6)

Originated right after the end of World War II the international organism was concerned with the promotion of peace by education and the suppression of all kinds of discrimination against mankind.

Yet, according to the Constitution's preamble, the terrible war that had just ended was a consequence of States denial of democratic principles based upon dignity, equality, and mutual respect for all men. The propagation of doctrines of inequality of men and races, "through ignorance and prejudice", paved the way that made the war possible (UNESCO, 2020[1945], p. 5).

To prevent a new occurrence of the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust, UNESCO sought an example in a society with a lower level of ethnic tensions, that could be replicated in the rest of the world. On the other hand, Brazilian social scientists and international academics had taken the task of comprehending the Brazilian racial scenario and also understanding the incorporation of different groups into modernity (MAIO, 1999).

In October 1949 the Brazilian physician and anthropologist Arthur Ramos was appointed as the UNESCO's Department of Social Sciences director. In conformity with the organization's expectations, Ramos drew a plan to conduct sociological and anthropological experiments in Brazil. In alignment with UNESCO's increasing concerns on the matter of racism and socioeconomic problems in countries in the periphery; Arthur Ramos considered it important to investigate the insertion of negros and indigenous groups into modernity – in the context of industrialization in Brazil especially in cities like Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo (*ibid.*, p. 142).

Unfortunately, Ramos could not see his research agenda being put into practice, dying right after the outline of his plan had been finished. Nonetheless, the international organism furthered his project, and his insights were incorporated into the final version of the organization's research program. Arthur Ramos corroborated the idea of the German historian Rüdiger Bilden, living in the United States and a close friend to Gilberto Freyre in Columbia University, that Brazil was a "laboratory of civilization".

In 1929 Bilden published an article in the scientific journal *The Nation* entitled *Brazil, a laboratory of civilization*. His idea was that Brazil was an important case to be studied, because of the complex mixture of races in the country. It could turn into a prominent field study for ethnologists and anthropologists interested in this subject. The country was evolving and modernizing without bloodshed or conflict and it was on the way to form a new race in the tropics (PALLARES-BURKE, 2013).

Although Arthur Ramos believed in the racial democracy consensus, he did not ignore the social inequalities between blacks and whites in the country and not even the existence of racial prejudice (MAIO, 1999). Ramos affirms that only from the 1940s onwards Brazilian social sciences started its process of professionalization breaking up with the essayist tradition of interpretation of Brazil's national identity that marked the sociological and anthropological productions in the 1920s and 1930s.

According to him, it was necessary to produce a systematized sociological study about the different racial and ethnic groups in Brazil and their insertion in different cultural contexts to understand the prevalence of racial inequalities. Only

through a thorough process of investigation, one could dare to conceptualize Brazilian people's identity according to Arthur Ramos (1948 *apud* MAIO, 1999).

In the context of an increasing demand for institutionalization and professionalization of social sciences in Brazil, the UNESCO Project took place in the country. The debates on the matter of a mixed-race population by the essayist production and the foreign literature available since the nineteenth century reaffirming racial harmony in such a diverse society also contributed to the enterprise.

Similarly, the international context marked by discussions on racism and discrimination in the United States and Europe, the anticolonial movements in Africa, and the beginning of the Cold War were all favorable conditions to produce the study that was put into practice under the sponsorship of the United Nation's organism. The domestic situation was equally important for the choice that was made over Brazil as a field study. UNESCO was interested in the implications of modernity and industrialization in the peripheries. In this way, Brazil became the perfect place.

In June 1950 during the UNESCO 5th General Conference held in Florence, Italy, the participants approved the creation of a research program about racial relations in Brazil (MAIO, 1999). The option to choose the country as a field experiment for the research on racial relations had an intimate connection with the international context and the organization's goals (*ibidem*, p. 143). UNESCO supported initiatives to combat racism through the understanding of its causes, consequences, and the eventual elimination of this problem.

In the United States of America and South Africa, racism persisted through segregation and apartheid. The Cold War created a bi-polar world led by two superpowers: the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (URSS) (HENDRICKSON, c2021). In Africa, movements of independence spread throughout the continent.

Marcos Chor Maio (1999) affirms that these events made the racial matter a recurrent issue in the early years of UNESCO creation. In this regard, the intergovernmental organization encouraged the scientific production and dissemination of knowledge about racism, its motivations, and consequences, and the ways to overcome this problem (*ibid.*).

In April 1950, the Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux, a member of UNESCO's Department of Social Sciences, was appointed together with the Brazilian anthropologist Ruy Coelho to lead the work of the organization in Brazil. Maio (1999) highlights some aspects that influenced the process of development of the UNESCO Project.

In the first place, a tradition of studies on race relations, especially in Bahia and São Paulo, supported by academic centers and institutional partnerships - such as the Escola Livre de Sociologia e Política (ELSP) and the Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras in the University of São Paulo; the Columbia University/State of Bahia accord; and the Instituto Joaquim Nabuco in Recife. In the second place, the international organization's concern with the process of industrialization and its impacts in underdeveloped regions of the world.

In the beginning, the idea was to circumscribe the research to the State of Bahia. In the city of Salvador, there was a long tradition of studies about the negro since the end of the nineteenth century. In the 1930s and 1940s, the city attracted foreign researchers due to the Columbia University/State of Bahia accord with special regard to the research developed by Ruth Landes.

The American anthropologist, Ruth Landes, who arrived in Rio de Janeiro in autumn, 1938, developed innovative research on the topic of the women on the services of *Candomblé* in Salvador, Bahia. She wrote in the prologue for the second edition of her book, *The City of Women* (1967 [2002]), the following statement:

Brazil gave me a totally unexpected comprehension of the facility with which different races could live together, in a civilized and enjoyable manner. [...] This book about Brazil does not discuss racial problems there – because there was none. It simply describes the life of Brazilians of dark skin, balanced and gracious people, whose enjoyment is proverbial in their own land and undying in my mind. (LANDES, 2002. p. 34, *our translation*)

Taking the preceding statement into consideration, the Brazilian anthropologist Peter Fry makes a still more elucidative comment:

Reading these words today, the reader may come to conclude that Landes was missing any critical sense for not having realized the racism in the *Brazilian way* [*à brasileira*]. But, in the decades of 1930 and 1940, this image about Brazil was amply accepted, in the country and the rest of the world. In truth, there are good reasons to suppose that the idea of ‘racial democracy’ has been consolidated by activists, writers, and intellectuals that were looking to Brazil from lands where the rule was segregation. [...] In 1944, the Jewish writer Stefan Zweig thought that Brazil was the most harmonious society that he had ever visited. In the time of DuBois and Landes, then, Brazil was considered a ‘racial democracy’, where the relations among people of different colors were fundamentally consonant. (FRY, 2002, p. 28, *our translation*)

As Peter Fry concluded about Ruth Landes and other thinkers of her generation, including Stefan Zweig, concerning their supposed naivety, “there are good reasons to think that some problems, such as some beauties, are on the eyes of who sees (FRY, 2002. p. 28, *our translation*).

The Columbia University/State of Bahia accord aimed to investigate the social life of three rural communities near Salvador for the future application of public policies in the area. Charles Wagley was responsible to inform Alfred Métraux about the research that was been conducted. Wagley was also an anthropologist, he came to Brazil for the first time in 1939. On that occasion, he worked with the *Tapirapé* indigenous community in central Brazil.

In 1941, Wagley was working with the *Tenetebara* and in the following year, he was required to the staff of the Special Service of Public Health (SESP) becoming a member of the technical board of the Office for Inter-American Affairs. An international cooperation program between Brazil and the United States in a war effort to support strategic raw-material workers in the Amazon Valey.

While writing his seminal book, *AMAZON TOWN: A Study of Man in the Tropics* (1953), Wagley had access to the data collected for the UNESCO research, that later became the chapter *Race Relations in an Amazon Community* in the study: *Race and Class in Rural Brazil* (1952). When Alfred Métraux came to Brazil to conduct his investigations in the country, both Wagley and him worked closely together in the project, the former suggested the incorporation of the “UNESCO Project” into the program of international cooperation: Columbia University/State of Bahia (WAGLEY, 1957).

Due to the influence of distinguished academics, the research expanded its horizons. For Otto Klineberg, one of the founders of the Psychology Department at the University of São Paulo, it was necessary to consider other parts of Brazil as equally important for the investigation. He is straight to affirm that São Paulo and Salvador were two different realms despite being big cities (KLINEBERG, 1950 *apud* MAIO, 1999).

Charles Wagley also defended the idea that the research should not be restricted to Salvador alone, but it should also consider other locations for the study. His view as Roger Bastide’s perspective was influenced by the discussion held in the *I Congresso do Negro Brasileiro* held in 1950 in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The event hosted by the *Teatro Experimental do Negro* aimed to connect the intelligentsia (social scientists and intellectuals) with the black movement. According to Maio (1999), the idea was to offer an alternative that linked academy and policymaking in the combat against social inequalities between blacks and whites.

In this way, Marcos Chor Maio (2004) analyses what he describes as the “black box” of UNESCO investigation in Brazil, an allusion to the concept coined by the French philosopher Bruno Latour (2000 *apud* MAIO, 2004). In this regard, it is commonly assumed that the UNESCO Project took place in Brazil encouraged by the held belief that Brazilian society enjoyed a high level of social and racial harmony, in which there was no discrimination and no racism manifestation.

The organization intended to offer the world a model using the Brazilian case as a successful example to be applied in other realities. However, as the investigations evolved it was verified the existence of systematic color discrimination in Brazil (*ibid.*, p. 144). The racial utopia was questioned. It was the beginning of a tradition among social scientists that considered racial democracy as a myth and an official ideology sponsored by the State according to its nationalist interests.

After a visit to Brazil at the end of 1950, Alfred Métraux published an article in the UNESCO journal *Courrier* with his first conclusions about the situation in Brazil. Entitled *Brazil: land of harmony for all races?* (1951) the title guards some resemblance with Stefan Zweig’s book *Brazil, land of the future* (1941). According to Josiowicz and Maio,

Métraux’s vision aligns with Zweig’s when it comes to the image of Brazil as a miscegenated country, where a new race was in a constant process of formation. The questioning of Stefan Zweig, who saw his civilization perverted by Nazism, already contain within itself the belief that Brazil represented the new, an absence of races. (JOSIOWICZ & MAIO, 2020, p. 185)

In the article, the author discusses the emergence of a “new race” in the continent as a result of an intense process of miscegenation. Given this incisive process, it was believed that concerns over racial identity were absent while the real problems were concentrated on a social nature (*ibid.*).

Alfred Métraux presents a contrasting description of the Brazilian racial scenario (MÉTRAUX, 1951, p. 3 *apud* MAIO, 2004, p. 160). For him, the Portuguese colonial inheritance had resulted in a more humane slavery system than in other parts of Anglo America (*ibid.*), giving the necessary conditions for the social ascension of brown and black skin people.

As Maio (2004) asserts, Métraux does not have a naïve portrait of the real problems going on, he alerts to the fact of adopting a simplistic view about the racial relations among different groups in Brazil. Even though he considered the racial status of the country to be relatively harmonious, he does not deny the existence of prejudice based on race. It becomes clearer as the individual scales up socially.

For instance, Métraux (1951 *apud* MAIO, 2004) observed that inter-racial marriages are more common among people from the same social class and it rarely occurs among individuals from extreme sides in the multitude of color skin classifications. Moreover, the unequal situation between blacks and whites in the more urbanized areas of the southeast region, he attributes to the past of slavery that has maintained these two groups apart from one another in socioeconomic terms.

Yet, for Marcos Chor Maio (2004), Alfred Métraux minimizes the effects of racism in Brazil. According to him, the representative agent of UNESCO in Brazil reveals the ambiguous linkage between racial cordiality and the persistence of discrimination. That correlation of facts was deeply embodied in the conduction of the research.

Therefore, the conclusions reached by the social scientists involved in the UNESCO Project do not hide the ambiguity between Brazil's racial democracy myth on one side and the existence of racism on the other (MAIO, 2004). Nonetheless, the investigation initiated by the international agency was very important for the consolidation of social sciences' studies in the country.

The program set the bases for the development of an agenda for social sciences that could align professional qualification in the fields of anthropology and sociology with the investigation of new trends in society affected by modernity in the context of increasing urbanization and industrialization (*ibid.*). The importance that concepts such as miscegenation and racial democracy occupied in this debate in the 1950s are still crucial for the understanding and the contributions offered by these academic fields nowadays.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The idea of Brazil as a racial democracy gained support among social scientists, politicians, and intellectuals in the country from the 1930s to the 1950s. This view was based on the idea of racial harmony among the races that constituted the Brazilian nation, that is the Portuguese, the Indigenous, and the African people. This image of a “racial paradise” was supported by the accounts of European and North American travelers who wrote about the racial relations in Brazil since the end of the nineteenth century.

In those accounts, discrimination and color prejudice were suppressed from the writing or relativized. It was believed by many historians of that time that the slavery system put into practice in Brazil was more humane in the treatment towards its slaves than other social experiences such as in the United States and South Africa, for example. This idyllic portrait was attributed to the relations between the Portuguese colonizers and his slaves that resulted in a new “individual type”, the Brazilian.

The sociologist Gilberto Freyre defended in the book *The Masters and the Slaves* (1933) that the process of miscegenation created “fraternity zones” settled the social distance between the “big house” and the slave quarters, thus resulting in a social democracy. Nonetheless, he is clear to state that the relations between masters and slaves were always marked by thick hierarchical social structures of superiors and inferiors.

The social distance that appeared in society, after the abolition was proclaimed in 1888, between black and white citizens was thought to be a question of social class and not of race differences. Before the law, all individuals were considered to have the same rights, but they did not enjoy the same opportunities. That is why for black intellectuals and activists it was necessary a “second abolition” to handle those problems and make racial democracy not only an ideal but also a materialized fact.

These considerations did not prevent racial democracy from becoming a popular concept among social scientists and thinkers alike of those days. While in the eighteenth-century miscegenation was considered a problem causing societies and individuals to degenerate in the nineteen-hundreds it became a synonym of harmony and a model to be followed by other countries.

The idea of Brazil as a “laboratory of civilization” became popular all over the world. It inspired the Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig to write a laudatory book about the country which he stemmed as the land of the future. Contrary to the Europe of his early youth that was now perverted by the horrors of two world wars, driven by “attempts of racial purity”; Brazil was a land that welcomed all races and nationalities. As he declares, despite the country’s complicated circumstances, it knew how to deal with the presence of different races in its large territory.

At the beginning of the 1950s, the racial democracy debate in Brazil influenced an initiative by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization in the country. The international organism conducted a research program known as the UNESCO Project to study the development of racial relations in Brazil. The program occurred met the goals of the United Nations organization and the demands for professionalization and institutionalization of Brazilian social science departments.

In this way, the international chaotic situation with the recent end of World War II, the anti-colonial movements, and the beginning of the Cold War drew UNESCO attempts for peace among nations. In Brazil, a tradition of studies on race relations, especially in Bahia and São Paulo, supported by academic centers and institutional partnerships gave support to the development of a research agenda on that matter.

From 1951 to 1952 the UNESCO Project developed investigations in different locations of the country where the economic transformations could have an impact on racial relations among individuals, in cities like Salvador, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Recife. After a visit to Brazil in 1950 before the research beginning, Alfred Métraux, UNESCO representative in Brazil, wrote a report about the racial situation in the country as he had seen so far called *Brazil, land of harmony for all races?* (1951).

In the article, Métraux discusses the complex racial reality of the country. He found proof of the existence of systematic discrimination and color-based prejudice in Brazil. Nonetheless, he presents the ambiguities inherent to the logics of racial cordiality and racism in the Brazilian way enacted in the country. These discussions over the validity of racial democracy and the existence or not of racism were an integral part of the investigations developed by the researchers who took part in the program.

It can be argued that the final results attained with the investigation discredited racial democracy being contested for academics such as Florestan Fernandes and Roger Bastide. For Fernandes racial democracy was nothing but a myth that never existed in reality, the elements of cordiality that were materialized in the relations between individuals of different groups were only supported in the limits of mutual tolerance, do not hide the social codes that reaffirmed inequalities (FERNANDES, 1960 *apud* MAIO, 1999).

Therefore, the racial democracy debate in the Brazilian social sciences mobilized discussions around the racial situation in Brazil. This disputed topic was of fundamental importance for the development in the early stage of fields such as Sociology and Anthropology. It was similarly important for the definition of a political and academic agenda concerning the definition of national identity in a moment in which Brazil was experiencing huge social and economic transformations and was questioning its role in modernity.

The essayist tradition of interpretation of Brazil tried to offer on its way answers to these difficult questions based on generalized views over society. If a methodological choice was made over the abandonment of this tradition, it does not invalidate its importance as analytical lenses to think about society nowadays. Rather, it can still offer us insights to look at sensitive aspects that confront us today. The racial discussions that marked this period have never left the horizon of Brazilian social sciences and probably never will; because as in those days it is still an updated theme that needs to be addressed over and over again to reach an understanding and find answers to these complex questions.

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